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Lingle chides Legislature for missed opportunities

By BOBBY COMMAND

"Missed opportunities."

That's how Republican Gov. Linda Lingle summed up the work of the 2004 Legislature the day after lawmakers wrapped up their session in Honolulu.

Speaking Friday to about 200 members and guests of the Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce, Lingle said the Legislature served up "half a loaf" as they addressed the crystal methamphetamine abuse epidemic, workers compensation reform, identification of important agricultural lands and the economy.

Lingle, welcomed by standing ovations before and after her talk, lamented the lack of bipartisan cooperation between the Legislature's Democratic majority, which overrode seven of her 10 vetoes, and the GOP minority, which backed most of the reform packages submitted by the governor's office.

"We thought they had a higher responsibility to the people in the state," said Lingle of the Democratic majority. "You're not just voting against me, you're voting against all the people across the state who voted me into office."

The governor said she sent a balanced package to the Legislature attacking the huge problem of "ice" abuse, but added the Democrats amended it into a measure that was opposed by Honolulu Mayor Jeremy Harris, the city prosecutor and the public defender.

"Instead, they - I refer to the Democrats - adopted a bill that made the manufacture of ice less of a crime than any other drugs," Lingle said, calling the gutting of her package all about the Democrats "showing power."

Lingle said her proposal to reform workers compensation would have reduced costs for business owners. However, she said the Legislature turned down all but one of her proposals, and then took the one facilitating the investigation of employee fraud and instead gave the insurance commissioner the ability to probe insurance companies and self-insured businesses.

The identification and protection of important agricultural lands - mandated by the 1978 Constitutional Convention - did not even receive a hearing, she said.

"One person - your Sen. Lorraine Inouye - killed it because of pressure from one or two of the biggest landowners in the state," Lingle said. "They wanted to make it voluntary - well, it's been voluntary for the last 25 years."

Lingle said the Legislature's override of her veto on the Hawaii Government Employees Association contract will force the administration to slash programs. The override means white collar workers will receive an 8 percent increase. Lingle had offered what amounted to a 4 percent increase.

"They (the Legislature) need to make sure the HGEA feels kindly to them (during the upcoming election) because that is the heart of their support," Lingle said.

She also criticized the raiding of special funds to pay for operating expenses, including a \$12 million withdrawal from the highways fund, which she said was actually a loss of closer to \$60 million because those funds are eligible for a 4-to-1 match from the Federal Highways Administration.

Bringing up Inouye by name again, Lingle said her nominee for the Third Circuit Court bench - Ted Hong, a former Hilo attorney and corporation counsel under the Mayor Stephen Yamashiro administration - was turned down because "Lorraine Inouye doesn't like him."

Lingle said she was asked if she would nominate him to serve as a permanent member of the University of Hawaii's Board of Regents, but Hong turned her down, saying that "he didn't want to go through that again."

Citing a poll that showed only a 39 percent approval rating of the Legislature but 59 percent approval of individual lawmakers, Lingle asked why the difference in the numbers.

"It's because (constituents) don't know their voting records," she said. The governor urged people to do so before casting ballots for any legislator during the upcoming elections.

Lingle also said that while frustrated with the session, she is not about to give up. "People say, 'we don't know how you can stand it,'" Lingle said. "I say the alternative is to just turn it over to (the Democrats).

"Well," she said. "I don't want to do that."

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